The Effects of Entering the LIS Workforce in a Recession: North Carolina, 1964–2005

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Abstract

This article examines the short- and long-term effects of entering the LIS workforce during a recession. It looks specifically at cohorts graduating from six North Carolina LIS programs during the recessions of 1973–75, 1980–82, 1990–91, and 2001 and compares aspects of their starting job, current job, pay, and indicators of job quality with those of nonrecession graduates of the same programs over the period from 1964 to 2005. Additional analyses are performed using job search and work setting match variables for a more in-depth look at recent graduates in the last recession (2001). We find that, examining the measures available, the labor market for North Carolina library and information science graduates appears to be relatively "recession-proof."

Introduction

In the midst of the current recession, concerns about job insecurity, hiring freezes, and new layoffs dominate both water cooler and policy discussions. Less thought is given to the longer-term significance of such periods on individuals who weather times of economic recession at key turning points in their worklife or career. Understanding this long-term impact of the timing of career turning points can help workforce planners, individuals, and other stakeholders put current economic pressures in context and strategize with long-term prospects in mind.

The literature concerning the effects of economic recession specifically on the library and information science (LIS) workforce is scarce. What exists may be said to fall into one of three fairly broad categories, none of which touches very directly on the subject at hand: institutional

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histories, which describe policy and attitudinal shifts on the part of professional organizations or libraries in response to recession; descriptions of how libraries dealt with difficult economic times (or, alternatively, prescriptions for so doing); and anecdotal accounts of how individual librarians and information workers coped with difficult job markets.

A recent example of a work that falls into the first category is Brendan Luyt's account of the American Library Association's political stance during the Great Depression in which the author argues that the ALA helped to advance a political agenda "defending public spending from powerful populist anti-tax coalitions" (2007). In another recent article, Will Manley likewise focused on the plight of American librarians in the Great Depression by analyzing a symposium paper presented by one Louise M. Norse of the Brooklyn Public Library in 1937. The self-described "author of nine books on the lighter side of library science," Manley isolates Norse for her willingness to speak hard truths to the profession, including the presumably controversial view that library administrators had "frankly taken advantage of the times and have secured the cream of each year's class at the lowest figure" (2007). Elsewhere, Michael Blayney explored Depression-Era libraries' conscious agenda of bestowing "cultural democracy" on the masses (a very American way of addressing the problem of inequality, it may be said: libraries supplying the "means" of self-improvement by which it is expected that industrious citizens will pull themselves up) (1977). Other studies have looked at the response, usually given in a heroic cast, of libraries in a particular region or sector (see Carmichael, 1992; Seavey, 2003). What the foregoing archival studies share is a preoccupation with the Great Depression to the exclusion of subsequent recessions and a focus on organizational responses, which precludes, or in any case, militates against a focus on the workforce in general. Conceptually, it is history very much from the top-down—as organizational histories tend to be—and it does therefore not impugn the authors of these studies to say that they do not shed much light on the plight of the LIS workforce in the face of an economic turndown. Had they focused on the workforce, though, their findings still would have applied only to the Depression Era.

Most of the remaining literature on librarianship and recession relates to how libraries and librarians/information professionals, respectively, dealt (or ought to deal) with economic slowdowns. Typical of the former type of article, Ellen G. Miller (2009) calls for a new kind of advocacy for libraries as the nation enters what appears to be an extended recession. According to Miller, the scarcity occasioned by a recession—and the demonstrated increase in library visits and use during economic downturns—actually represents an opportunity for libraries to argue for expanded roles and funding (2009). Mary Corcoran's article, on the other hand, is representative of the literature on how individual librarians/information workers can best handle a distressed labor market. Her not altogether original—but very sound—advice is to "follow the money." With corporate libraries closing down, Corcoran argues that the business of buying (or finding) information does not go away; job seekers need to seek out who is selling information in any economy and seek employment there (2002). Although some of this advice will no doubt prove helpful, it is almost completely prescriptive and not based on systematic research. Given its impressionistic, anecdotal nature, in any case, it imparts few definitive lessons.

Although not much research addresses how recession has affected LIS professionals, there exists some sociological literature, which is relevant to the present study. In a 1979 article, Phyllis Moen demonstrated that several factors contributed to extended periods of unemployment for Michiganders during the 1975 recession. Among these factors were (unsurprisingly) a high county unemployment rate and membership in a group Moen termed the "'hard-core' unemployed." More interesting for the traditionally feminized field of LIS, Moen found that unemployed women heads of households had a harder time finding employment than their male counterparts (1979). Likewise focusing on the 1974–75 recession, Scott Cummings concluded that the jobs of women and minorities were more vulnerable than those of other employees during that economic slump (1987). George Wilson and Debra Branch McBrier, meanwhile, found that in upper-tier professions, layoffs of African-Americans were less structured by "traditional stratification-based causal factors" like socioeconomic status and job and labor market circumstances than the layoffs of non-African-Americans. Crucially for the purposes of this study, though, Wilson and McBrier found that racial determinants of layoffs were significantly more prevalent in non-service-based firms and in the private sector than in service-based firms and the public sector, respectively (2005). Meaning: racial determinants played less of a role in precisely the kinds of environments where LIS jobs are most likely to be found.

Among relatively recent sources, sociologist Andrew Abbott's work has borne most directly on the question of how the LIS profession specifically confronts threats from other professions. Abbott noted that information professionals, in general, are particularly engaged in turf battles over their professional purview since "Deciding what is relevant information inevitably embroils the information client and the information professional," Abbott wrote. "The information professions are, *by definition*, involved in continuously negotiated and contested professional divisions of labor" (1988, p. 223). From this assumption, it might follow that information professionals are uniquely vulnerable to incursions by other professional fields. If that were in fact the case, it would only stand to reason that LIS professionals would be particularly vulnerable in economic recessions. It may not be possible, for example, for your typical displaced librarian to follow Corcoran's advice and "follow the money." As organizations clamp down on costs, would it not also stand to reason that information clients might try to subsume the function of information professionals with whom, according to Abbott, they are embroiled with in any case? This study was undertaken, then, to answer the question of whether LIS professionals are particularly (or at all) susceptible to national economic recessions.

Methodology

The Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science (WILIS 1) project[1] is a three-year research project implemented to study the career patterns of graduates of LIS programs in North Carolina. A collaborative research project of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Science and the University of North Carolina Institute on Aging, the project aims to explore the educational, workplace, career, and retention issues faced by the LIS workforce. The five participating LIS master's programs in North Carolina are Appalachian State University Library Science Program, East Carolina University Department of Library Science and Instructional Technology, North Carolina Central University School of Library and Information Sciences, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Science, and University of North Carolina–Greensboro Department of Library and Information Studies. For further details about the project, please see J. Marshall et al.'s article in this issue.

Alumni who graduated during the years of 1964–2007 (n = 7,566) were invited to participate in a Web-based survey that collected data on their work and educational histories, as well as their current concerns about workforce issues and the LIS field. The WILIS 1 survey had a 35 percent response rate (n = 2,653). For a detailed overview of the methodology for this career survey, see the article by Morgan, J. Marshall, V. Marshall, and Thompson in this issue.

Analytic Strategy

Ten classes of LIS graduates (out of forty-two) in the sample had graduated in a recession year. The analytic strategy was designed to assess the impact of these recessions on their careers. The four recessions we examined took place in the following periods: 1973–75, 1980–82, 1990–91, and 2001. First, we looked at historical trends in earnings and enrollment by program over the data period. Second, we compared earnings, number of hours worked, and whether the respondent's first job was considered a full-time job, looking at those who graduated in a recession year and those who did not. Using these same questions, we compared the individual recessions, and we looked at the impact if we lagged the effect by a year. Further, we looked at duration of first job after LIS program to see if respondents graduating in a recession year held on to their jobs longer than nonrecession graduates. Then, we looked at a more specific measure of job search length (in months), preference of work setting match, and the number of sectors considered in their job search for the last recession to take advantage of these additional measures that were fielded only with recent graduates. Finally, we look at a few markers of overall career stability and satisfaction.

In order to compare wages for the first job immediately after graduation from their LIS program, we had to annualize wages and adjust them to 2007 dollars. If individuals considered themselves full time, their report on their yearly salary was used as their annual wages. If individuals were considered part time or if they reported their hourly wages, wages were multiplied by hours reported per week and again by fifty-two weeks. Using the average Consumer Price Index (CPI) for each year (wages were reported for the year they left each job), each years' earnings were adjusted to 2007 wages using the appropriate CPI multiplier. In this way, annualized earnings are roughly comparable despite the different time periods in which they were earned.

Results

In order to examine trends across all five North Carolina LIS master's programs, we limited our sample to graduates in the years 1964 through 2005. We defined recent graduates according to the recent graduate survey module, which included those graduating from 2001 through 2005. Table 1 shows the demographic and earnings characteristics of the two overlapping samples. As is to be expected, this workforce is predominately female (82 percent), largely white (89 percent) and the overall age at graduation was approximately thirty-three years of age.

As outlined above, our first strategy is to describe time trends in both earnings and enrollment. Figure 1 shows retrospectively reported earnings by the year respondents ended their first LIS job. Due to the retrospective nature of the reports, we anticipate that there is more error the longer the period between the end of the job and the current employment situation. While there are some differences in median earnings by year, no clear pattern emerges relative to the four recessions we examine (i.e., 1973–75, 1980–82, 1990–91, and 2001). The trend in median wages appears to be flat if not declining over the time period studied. In fact, there is a small (-0.08) but significant ($p<0.01$) negative correlation between graduation year and logged earnings. Figure 2 shows the enrollment trends by LIS program. In this figure, we see increasing enrollment numbers overall across the five programs. While there are several year-to-year comparisons where enrollment seems to jump, this seems to happen consistently after a recession has begun. It does, however, also happen in some years where a recession is not the explanation.

Our second strategy was to examine some of the characteristics of the

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Overall and Recent Graduate Samples

	All Graduates, Years: 1964–2005	**Recent Graduates,** Years: 2001–2005
	***N* = 2524**	***N* = 537**
Gender	82% female	81% female
Overall mean age	50.8, sd 11.8	39.0, sd 9.6
Ethnicity	11% nonwhite	14% nonwhite
Overall median age	53	36
Mean age at graduation	32.7, sd 8.7	35.1, sd 9.4
Median earnings in first LIS job (adjusted to 2007 wages)*	$39,514 (*N* = 1239)	$39,082 (if not current, *N* = 163)
25th percentile:	$32,543	$34,246
75th percentile:	$48,000	$46,282
Median earnings in current job*	$51,000 (*N* = 1801)	$44,000 (*N* = 457)
25th percentile:	$41,560	$39,000
75th percentile:	$65,000	$52,500

*Total numbers of cases are significantly less than response sample numbers reported due to skip patterns related to job histories and missing data.

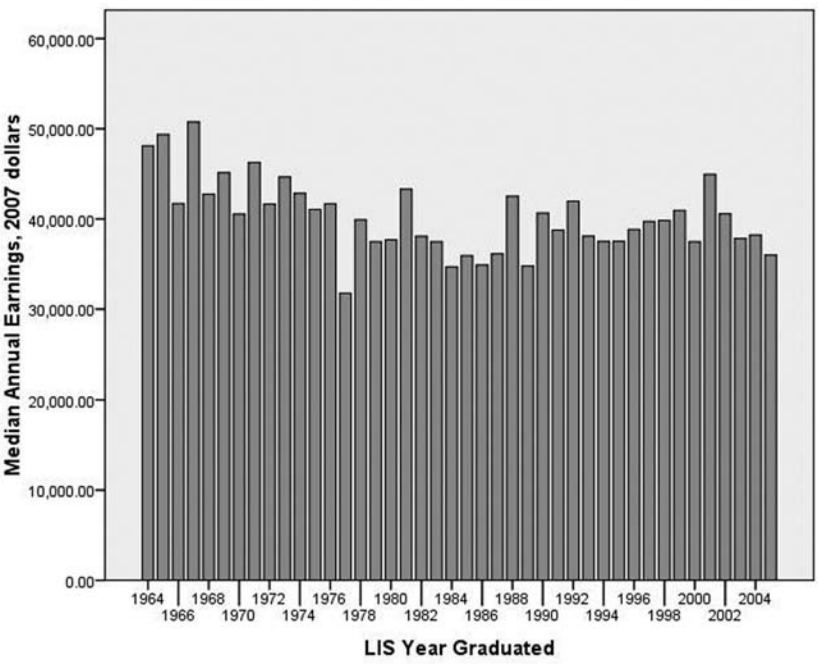

Figure 1. Annualized Reported Earnings by Year Ended First LIS Job

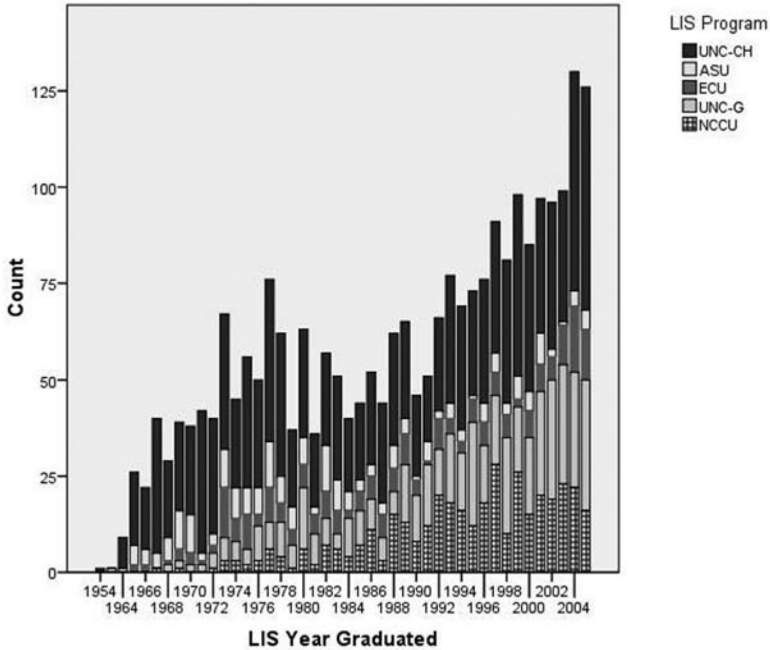

Figure 2. Enrollment Trends by LIS Program: 1964–2005

first job after the LIS program for respondents who graduated in a recession year. One could hypothesize that individuals who entered the job market during a recession may earn lower salaries on average, and be less likely to match with a full-time job. In terms of annualized reported wages, there was no significant difference between mean earnings or mean logged earnings (to account for skewed income distributions) between those who graduated in a recession year and those who did not. Further, when each recession is taken separately, there is no significant difference in mean earnings or mean logged earnings[2] between recession and nonrecession entrants. In addition to the fact that these earnings are self-reported earnings, they are also tied to the year they ended their jobs rather than the starting wage. Still, there appears to be no impact on earnings even if you look at post–LIS program wages lagged a year beyond a recession. The number of hours worked and whether the respondent was considered a full-time employee were also compared by whether they had entered the job market in a recession year. Neither comparison proved significantly different when looking systematically by individual recessions. Finally, we looked at duration of first job after LIS. Since there was a significant time trend in duration of first job after LIS (i.e., duration of first job has declined over time), we controlled for graduation year and predicted duration of first job after graduation ($n = 2{,}131$). Graduating in a recession year had a significant ($p<0.01$) positive impact on duration of first job.

The next set of comparisons took advantage of some measures fielded with recent graduates who graduated between 2001 and 2005. These measures included the number of library/industry sectors considered in the job search, duration of job search in months, and match between preferred and actual work setting. Table 2 shows the percent of recent graduates considering each workplace and the percent of match of preferred with actual work setting by each type of workplace. The number of workplaces considered was constructed as a sum of all the sectors considered of a total of sixteen possible (e.g., academic library, public library, technology company).

The average graduate considered 2.44 sectors, and there was no significant difference between those graduating in 2001 and the other recent graduates. The average graduate took approximately four months searching for a job before finding their first job. Graduates in 2001 were not significantly different in job search duration than other recent graduates. Finally, for each of the sectors considered, graduates were asked in which setting they ended up working. For example, of those that considered academic libraries, approximately 45 percent were placed in an academic library. When the major sectors were considered (i.e., academic library, public library, school library, and technology company), the recession was not a factor in whether the respondent was more or less likely to secure employment in that sector (see table 2).

Looking at overall markers of the career, we find much the same thing. First, there was no significant mean difference in total number of employment breaks reported (of six months or more duration). Only 18 percent of respondents reported a break of six or more months. Second, there was no difference in the average total number of unique job types (up to five studied). In the sample, on average, respondents reported on three jobs. Third, there was no significant difference in career satisfaction as measured by "overall, I am satisfied with LIS as a career." In the total sample, 95 percent agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. Each analysis was also conducted by individual recession. No significant differences were found in those analyses.

Limitations

The impact of a recession on the jobs and careers of LIS graduates is likely very complex and nuanced. While these data were not designed to study this specifically, the WILIS data offered a variety of measures to ex-

Table 2. Workplace Match on Job Search for Recent Graduates ($N = 327$)

	Recent graduates considering workplace (%) in job search	Hired in workplace considered (%)
Academic library	45	45
Public library	37	40
School library/Media center	44	81
Health library	12	29
Law library	7	9
Corporate library	13	14
Other special library	19	8
Government library	17	18
Institution of higher learning	13	19
Primary or secondary education	3	20
Nonprofit organization	9	13
Technology company	11	34
Other company	6	39
Self-employment	1	100
Other	5	44

amine the impact of graduating in a recession year. With that said, these measures were not exhaustive. Further, it is possible that the effect of recession was attenuated in some of the measures we studied and therefore differences were not detected. For example, earnings were retrospectively asked of respondents related to when they ended their first job. Estimates of starting wages gathered in "real time" may have been more sensitive to differences between recession and nonrecession graduates. Finally, the analysis was limited in that it could only look at in-depth job search measures for recent graduates, which meant that we could not examine these measures for earlier recessions.

Conclusion

The principal finding of this study was that the labor market for LIS graduates appears to be relatively "recession proof" over the period of the WILIS 1 study (i.e., 1964–2005). Recent graduates did not have significantly longer searches or see any impact in earnings or hours in the first job after their LIS program. The only significant difference seems to be that respondents who graduate in a recession year are more likely to hold on to their first job longer than the average graduate, controlling for a time trend of shortening first job duration. This can be explained in one of two ways. Respondents graduating in a recession year may feel increased job insecurity and hang on to jobs longer simply because of the anxiety they felt in attempting to make a match. Alternatively, there may be a lag effect that was not detected in this research. Such a "time release" effect is possible particularly in fields unusually dependent on public funds, as there is generally a lag in the public sector experiencing recessions. (Recessions first affect private industries, which then pay less in taxes [Hatch, 2004].) This effect would then correspond with recession-era LIS graduates staying in their first jobs for longer periods of time. This perception of insecurity, however, does not seem to effect long-term career satisfaction or achievement. Finally, it remains to be seen whether this finding, that the LIS labor market is relatively "recession proof," will hold for the current severe economic downturn.

Notes

1. The WILIS 1 study was supported by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The primary research team from the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina Institute on Aging consisted of: Joanne Gard Marshall, lead principal investigator; Victor W. Marshall, coprincipal investigator; Jennifer Craft Morgan, coprincipal investigator; Deborah Barreau, coinvestigator; Barbara Moran, coinvestigator; Paul Solomon, coinvestigator; Susan Rathbun-Grubb, research scientist; Cheryl A. Thompson, project manager; and Shannon Walker, graduate research assistant.
2. Logging earnings corrects for the non-normality of earnings distributions.

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